

Landmarks Preservation Commission  
January 8, 1991, Designation List 231  
LP-1717

THE DILLER RESIDENCE, 309 West 72nd Street, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1899-1901; Gilbert A. Schellenger, architect.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1184, Lot 6.

On September 19, 1989, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Prentiss Residence and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 3). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Six witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no witnesses in opposition to designation. The owner indicated that he was not opposed to designation. One letter in favor of designation was received by the Commission.<sup>1</sup>

#### DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

##### Summary

The Diller Residence, designed by Gilbert A. Schellenger and constructed in 1899-1901, is an elegant Renaissance Revival style town house located on a prominent site near the intersection of West 72nd Street and Riverside Drive and is one of four grand town houses remaining at that corner. Built in accordance with restrictive covenants in an area long-intended for high-quality residential development, it is an excellent example of an impressive town house designed for that area. Designed with an American basement plan, the Diller Residence is faced in brick and limestone with classically-inspired ornament and has a striking presence at the gateway to Riverside Drive.

##### Development of the Upper West Side

The Upper West Side, known as Bloomingdale prior to its urbanization, remained largely undeveloped until the 1880s. In the early eighteenth century, Bloomingdale Road (which approximated the route of present-day Broadway) was opened through the rural area, and provided the northern route out of the city then concentrated at the southern tip of Manhattan Island.

The Upper West Side of Manhattan was included in the Randel Survey of 1811 (known as the Commissioners' Map) which established a uniform grid of broad avenues and narrow cross streets in Manhattan as far north as 155th Street. However, years elapsed before most streets on the Upper West Side were actually laid out, some as late as the 1870s and 1880s, and land was subdivided into building lots.

Improved public transportation contributed to the growth and sustained development of the Upper West Side. In 1864 the Eighth Avenue horse car

line was extended to 84th Street; previously the only transit facility was a stage coach line along Bloomingdale Road (renamed the Boulevard and later Broadway in 1898). In 1879, the horse car lines on Eighth Avenue were replaced by street rail service up to 125th Street, and the Ninth Avenue (Columbus Avenue) Elevated Railroad was completed with stations at 72nd, 81st, 93rd, and 104th Streets.

Development of the West End (the area between the Boulevard and the Hudson River) began slowly, due, to a large degree, to the hesitation of would-be residents, but, by 1885 the area had emerged as the part of the city experiencing the most intense real estate speculation. The expectation that the blocks along Riverside Drive and West End Avenue would be lined with mansions kept the value of these lots, as well as adjacent land, consistently higher and developers were willing to wait to realize profits from the potentially valuable sites. The real estate developers, including the West End and West Side Associations, ultimately stimulated the demand for houses in the West End. Real estate brochures and the local press drew attention to the territory west of the Boulevard, emphasizing the scenic quality of the setting and the availability of public transportation. The biggest boost to the development of the West End was the creation of Riverside Park and Drive (a designated New York City Scenic Landmark).

#### Riverside Drive and West 72nd Street<sup>2</sup>

In 1865 the first proposal for converting the land on the Upper West Side along the eastern shore of the Hudson River into an ornamental park was presented by Parks Commissioner William R. Martin. He and his colleagues believed such a plan would initiate the flowering of the West Side by drawing residents to the area and by encouraging further real estate development and the extension of rapid transit lines. The purchase of the park site and initial plans were approved in 1866. The drive, as proposed at this time, was a straight 100 foot-wide road. Commissioners soon realized this plan was impractical due to the existing topography. In 1873 they hired Frederick Law Olmsted (1822-1903), already distinguished by his role with Calvert Vaux (1824-95) in the successful design for Central Park, to propose an alternate design.

Olmsted's design for Riverside Park and Drive evoked simplicity and elegance. Considering the pre-existing topography, landscape, and views, he designed a drive that would wind around topographic features, would be comfortable for horses and pleasure driving, would provide shaded walks for pedestrians, and yet would give easy access to real estate bordering it on the east. Olmsted's plan was adopted by the Commissioners but the park was not executed under his supervision. Actually developed between 1875 and 1900 by designers including Calvert Vaux, Samuel Parsons (1845-1923), and Julius Munckwitz (1829-1902), Olmsted's original design was not adhered to in its entirety, with paths and plantings being added by the later designers.<sup>3</sup> The Drive begins at West 72nd Street and today continues north to approximately 129th Street, where it is effectively terminated by the

viaduct and the Manhattanville fault.<sup>4</sup> The Drive has a particularly strong character which derives from its curves that break with the regular street grid and its situation at the highest of the terraces of the Park overlooking the water-side setting.

By the fall of 1879, work was completed between 72nd and 85th Streets and Riverside Avenue (as it was called until 1908) was opened to the public in 1880.<sup>5</sup> Riverside Park and Drive fulfilled the Commissioners' plans for promoting the development of the area west of Broadway. The numerous and exceptional advantages of the location, namely, its situation on a plateau, its "advantages of pure air and beautiful surroundings, glimpses of New Jersey hills . . . and, the nearness of parks,"<sup>6</sup> assisted in making the area along Riverside Drive prime real estate, deserving of the highest character of residential development. The Drive was characterized by Clarence True, a prolific Upper West Side architect/developer, as "the most ideal homesite in the western hemisphere - the Acropolis of the world's second city."<sup>7</sup>

When, beginning in the mid-1880s, residential development commenced along Riverside Drive, grand mansions were the first type of dwelling constructed. As all New Yorkers could not afford freestanding mansions, town houses and rowhouses were also constructed on smaller lots. Clarence True was responsible for many of these rowhouses, establishing the character of much of the lower part of Riverside Drive. Examples of his work can be found in what are now the West End Collegiate and Riverside Drive-West 80th-81st Street Historic Districts. From the turn of the century through the 1930s, apartment buildings were constructed along the Drive, many of these replacing previously built rowhouses, institutional buildings, or mansions.

Originally part of the Harsen Estate, West 72nd Street was subdivided into 500 lots identified for residential use (due to restrictive covenants), and developed into a fashionable street. Its generous width (100 feet) and proximity to entrances to Central Park and Riverside Park gave this street advantages over others nearby. As early as 1866, West 72nd Street fell under the jurisdiction of Central Park; its landscaping was planned and maintained by park employees, while commercial traffic was severely limited. The convenience of the 72nd Street stop on the elevated transit line also fueled early development.

Construction on West 72nd Street began in 1880 opposite Central Park with the construction of the Dakota (Henry J. Hardenbergh, a designated New York City Landmark), an early luxury apartment house. After further real estate speculation, numerous rowhouses were constructed along the length of the street, mostly in the later 1880s and '90s. The opening of the IRT subway station at West 72nd Street and Broadway in 1904 and changing socio-economic conditions of the early twentieth century eventually altered the character of West 72nd Street. Many of the rowhouses were replaced by apartment buildings in the 1910s and '20s. Other rowhouses, mostly concentrated between Columbus and West End Avenues, were altered for commercial use at their first and/or second stories. The town houses located at the intersection of Riverside Drive and West 72nd Street are examples of buildings which survived the later phases of apartment building construction and commercial redevelopment.

The city block bounded by Riverside Drive on the west and 72nd Street on the south originally lay partly within the Richard Somarindyck farm and partly within the farm of Jacob Harsen. The property was acquired in 1867 by Gustavus A. Sacchi who began to convey the property in the same year. The intersection of Riverside Drive and West 72nd Street is an unusual one in Manhattan. The northeast corner at 72nd Street gently curves northward, creating an inviting gateway to Riverside Park and Drive. The building lots at this intersection were re-configured between 1891 and 1896 so that the lot frontages could follow the curve of the corner. (Previously an orthogonal lot system was overlaid on the irregular site.) This arrangement gives an air of distinction to the buildings constructed on these lots and draws the attention of the passer-by.

### The Design of the Diller Residence

Restrictive Covenants Diller acquired lot 6 of Block 1184 in 1899. The sale of the property was subject to conditions first established in a covenant contained in a deed transacted from Gustavus A. Sacchi to Sophie B. Church. This covenant set restrictions on the type of building which could be constructed on lots 6 and 24 and required that any building erected within forty feet of the front of those lots be built of stone or brick, and its roof be slate or metal. The same deed dictated a lengthy list of prohibited uses and building types, including: slaughterhouses, nail factories, breweries, livery stables, carpenter's shops, sugar refineries, menageries, "or any other manufactory, trade, business, or calling which may be in anywise dangerous, noxious, or offensive to the neighboring inhabitants...." This "covenant against nuisances" was to "run with the land" and was "binding upon all the future owners."<sup>8</sup> A similar covenant applied to lots along Riverside Drive between 72nd and 73rd Streets.<sup>9</sup>

Another deed restriction applied to the properties to the west of the Diller Residence along the Riverside Drive/West 72nd Street corner and required that houses erected there conform in building lines and in "substantial features" to a drawing prepared by C.P.H. Gilbert.<sup>10</sup> This restriction was initiated by John S. Sutphen, Sr., whose intention it was to establish a high-quality neighborhood "which would induce wealthy and select families to purchase and live there and would secure the future character and the occupancy of the residence to be erected thereon."<sup>11</sup> These restrictions were responsible for creating an area of harmoniously designed high-quality residences in the vicinity of the Diller Residence.

The Owner -- William E. Diller William E. Diller (1859-1936), a New York native, was a physician who received his medical degree from the University of Virginia in 1884 and continued his education at New York University Medical College. Diller retired from the medical profession in 1920 and pursued a career as a builder, having been involved in the real estate business as early as 1895. His obituary stated that he constructed more than 100 single-family houses on the west side of midtown Manhattan.<sup>12</sup> It seems that Diller purchased the lot at 309 West 72nd Street and constructed the residence for investment purposes only, based on the fact that the property was sold the year after the completion of construction. Nothing is

known of Sophie H. Mann, the subsequent owner. At the time of his death Diller resided at 390 West End Avenue. He was married to Elizabeth A. Diller.

The Plan Construction of the Diller Residence began on October 2, 1899, and was completed on January 3, 1901.<sup>13</sup> Original drawings for the town house indicate that it was similar to other American basement type town houses popular at the time.<sup>14</sup> This type of plan gained popularity due to its provision of a grand entrance hall and a reception room (entered from a low stoop at ground level) and the more private second-story which allowed for elegant entertaining. The house was large and commodious and its design concurred with the high expectations which developers had for the neighborhood.

Site The Diller residence is located at the western end of 72nd Street and its proximity to the bend in the road leading to Riverside Drive draws attention to the structure. It is harmonious with the other elegant town houses in the vicinity which display similar horizontal divisions, rounded bays, ornate entrance porticoes, and extensive detailing. These elements distinguish the Diller Residence not only as an important building on West 72nd Street, but also as a part of the fluid transition of that street to Riverside Drive.

Style The Diller Residence was designed by Gilbert A. Schellenger in the Renaissance Revival style which was quite popular during the years around the turn of the century. The resurgence of neo-classicism in the 1890s had its roots in the broader cultural movement of the "American Renaissance." The contemporary generation of American architects, influenced by the principles of the French Ecole des Beaux-Arts and the architecture of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, shifted their attention toward interpretations of Renaissance and Baroque prototypes of Italian, French, and German origin for inspiration for their designs. Leading architects such as McKim, Mead & White and Richard Morris Hunt had a great impact on the design of residential architecture in this period through their commissions for mansions for the wealthy in which they drew upon these sources. The stylistic influences, symbolically expressive of the prestige and affluence of America's -- and New York's -- upper class, in time filtered down to the more modest speculatively-built rowhouses of the middle class. Applied classically-inspired details including columns and pilasters, quoins, and stringcourses, and a general classical massing characterize the Renaissance Revival style, of which Gilbert A. Schellenger was a particularly avid adherent.

#### Gilbert A. Schellenger<sup>15</sup>

Gilbert A. Schellenger was established as an architect in New York by 1882. He had an extremely prolific career during the 1880s and '90s. Examples of Schellenger's work can be found in what are now the Carnegie Hill, Greenwich Village, Ladies' Mile, and Upper East Side Historic Districts. In addition, he was the second most prolific architect in what is now the Upper West Side/Central Park West Historic District, represented

by work spanning almost twenty years. Working for a number of developers in that area, he was responsible for numerous rows of houses and flats. His designs were primarily executed in the Renaissance Revival style, although he also used the neo-Grec, Queen Anne, and Romanesque Revival styles.

### Description

The five-story Diller Residence, faced in Roman brick and Indiana limestone, has an American basement plan. It is twenty-five feet wide and sixty-five feet deep. Three bays wide, the facade is divided into three horizontal sections. The one-story base is of heavily rusticated limestone and sits on a smooth-faced water table. A central entrance is framed by a shallow portico that is reached by a low stoop. Ionic columns and pilasters support the overhang of the bowed bay above. The entablature has carved vine detailing and moldings of anthemion, beads, and reels. The door surround has decorative moldings as well. (The original double doors have been removed and replaced by a wood door and a window with a grille.) To the east of the entrance is a window with a grille; original drawings indicate that a second entrance door was intended for this location. The western window has a decorative bowed sill. A bracketed cornice separates the basement from the parlor story.

The second, third, and fourth stories form the midsection of the facade. Stone corner quoins join these stories which are faced in Roman brick. A three-sided oriel articulates the second and third stories. The window surrounds have anthemion moldings and pilasters with similar capitals. A cornice with dentils and an egg and dart molding separates these stories. A blind balustrade with carved geometric ornament is found below the third-story windows. A bracketed cornice separates this story from the fourth which has a balcony with a stone balustrade atop the oriel. The anthemion motif is again found at the fourth-story window surrounds, the center one of which is elaborated with a rosette and vines. It contains a pair of doors with a transom, which was the original configuration. Other windows of the central bay originally had single-pane windows, probably casements. Other windows of the midsection were originally one-over-one double-hung wood. Currently, windows are a variety of wood double-hung, casement, and fixed configurations.

A cornice with rosettes and a series of moldings separates the midsection from the fifth story. Windows here have one-over-one double-hung wood sash with arched tops (not original). A series of moldings frames the arches and extends across the building at their spring line. A keystone is centered above each window. An elaborate cornice with a series of moldings, carved floral and vine detailing, dentils, and ornamented brackets surmounts the building. The areaway has been altered.

## Subsequent History

William E. Diller and Elizabeth A. Diller sold the property at 309 West 72nd Street to Sophie H. Mann in 1902. The property was subsequently conveyed and was converted to a multiple dwelling in 1927.<sup>16</sup>

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### NOTES

1. On April 12, 1983 the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Prentiss Residence and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (LP-1427, Item No. 9). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Two witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no witnesses in opposition to designation. Four letters in favor of designation were received by the Commission.
2. The information on Riverside Park and Drive was adapted from LPC, Riverside Drive and Riverside Park Designation Report, (New York, 1980); and Department of Parks and Recreation, Riverside Park-Evolution and Restoration, (New York, 1984).
3. Additional changes to the park have been made over the years. Monuments and sculptures were added beginning in the early 1900s, the railroad tracks were covered over, the West Side Highway constructed, playing fields added, and the park replanted.
4. A later portion resumes at 135th Street, meeting Fort Washington Park at 158th Street.
5. Other sections of the road remained incomplete until 1900-02 when the viaduct at 96th Street was built.
6. LPC, Riverside-West End Historic District Designation Report, (New York, 1989), p. 20.
7. Clarence True, A True History of Riverside Drive (New York, 1899), 12.
8. New York County, Office of the Register, Liber Deeds and Conveyances, Section 4, Block 1184, (June 6, 1867), Liber 1016, p. 431 and (May 25, 1899), Liber 68, p. 327.

9. Ibid., (Feb. 17, 1868), Liber 1043, p. 184. The lots along the Riverside Drive blockfront were once owned by John S. Sutphen, Sr. and are currently numbered 1 through 4 and 28 through 30. Previously they were numbered 18 through 24 and earlier followed an orthogonal lot system. (See Map #2.)
10. New York County, Office of the Register, (April 3, 1899), Liber 4, p. 207, Contracts; (May 4, 1899), Liber 68, p. 271; and (May 29, 1906), Liber 115, p. 261.
11. Maria Kleeberg obituary, New York Times, Aug. 24, 1903, p.3.
12. William E. Diller obituary, New York Times, Mar. 24, 1936, p.23.
13. New York City, Department of Buildings, Manhattan. Plans, Permits and Dockets. Block 1184, Lot 6. NB 1308-1899.
14. In the rear of the ground floor were found the kitchen, the laundry, and a room for servants. A stairway led to the main floor where there were located another reception room, a parlor at the front of the house, and a dining room and butler's pantry at the rear. This floor was called the "parlor story." Third, fourth, and fifth floors all contained bedrooms and bathrooms. Space was also provided for a library at the front of the house at the third floor. The fourth-floor balcony probably opened off of the master suite. The cluster of bedrooms and storage space on the fifth floor indicate that this floor accommodated servants. Curved bays at the parlor and third stories added variety and elegance to the interior. (NYC, Department of Buildings, Manhattan. Plans.)
15. LPC, Upper West Side/Central Park West Historic District Designation Report, (New York, 1990), p. A128-A130.
16. New York City, Department of Buildings, Manhattan. Alt 2141-1927.

## FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Diller Residence at 309 West 72nd Street has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as a part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Diller Residence, designed in the Renaissance Revival style by Gilbert A. Schellenger and built in 1899-1901 for William E. Diller, is an elegant town house with an American basement plan located on a prominent site near the southern end of Riverside Drive at West 72nd Street; that the residence, built in accordance with restrictive covenants in an area long-intended for high-quality residential development, is an excellent example of an impressive town house designed for that area; and that its design, featuring Roman brick facing with fine limestone ornament, as well as its siting, give it a striking presence at the gateway to Riverside Drive.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 (formerly Section 534, Chapter 21), of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Diller Residence, 309 West 72nd Street, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 1184, Lot 6, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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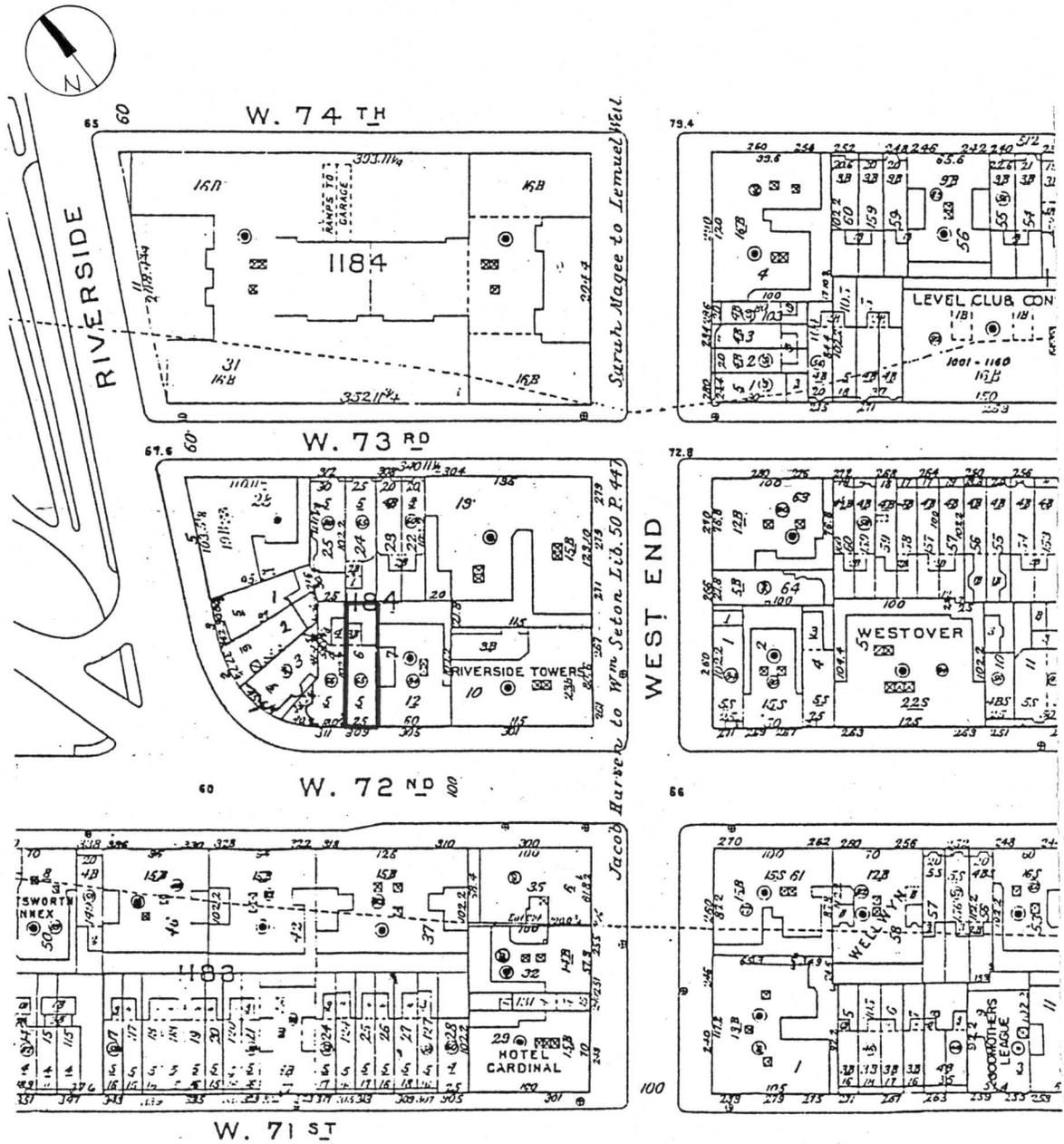
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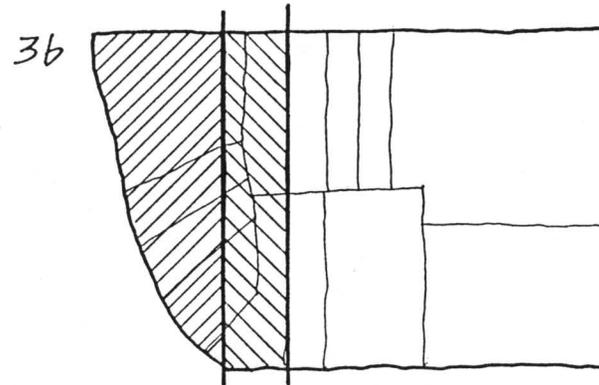
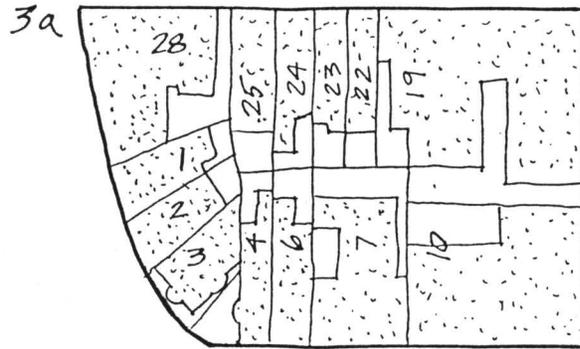
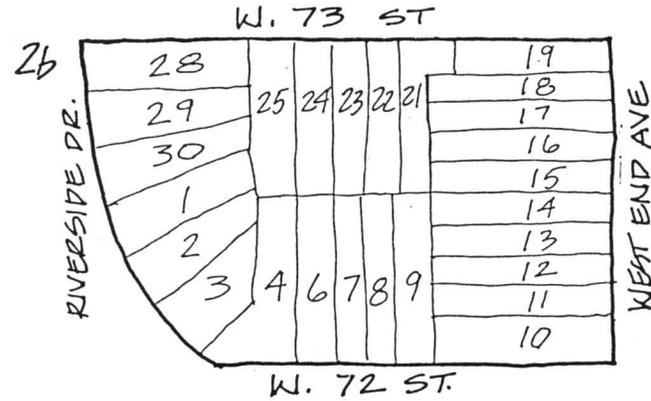
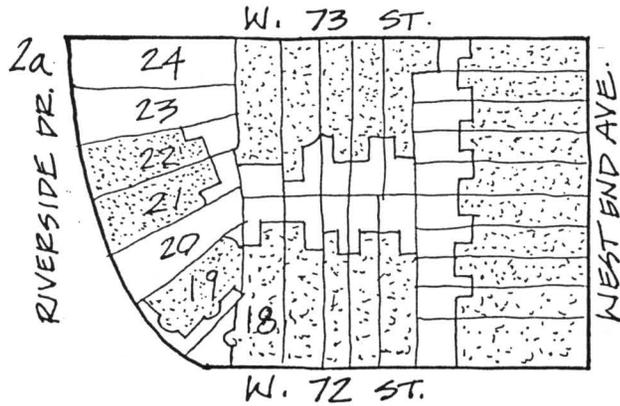
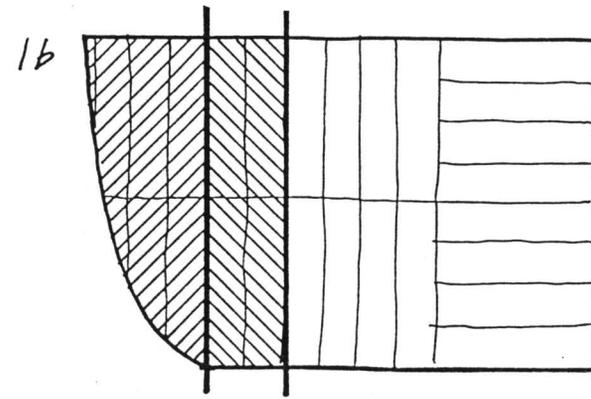
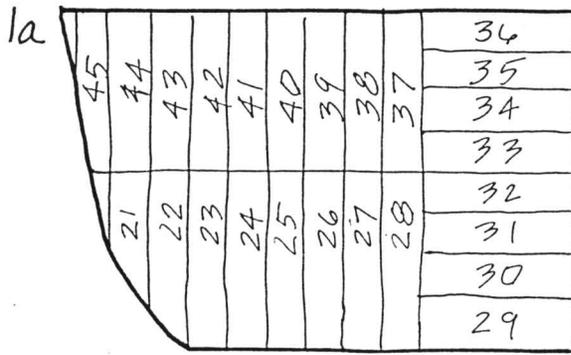
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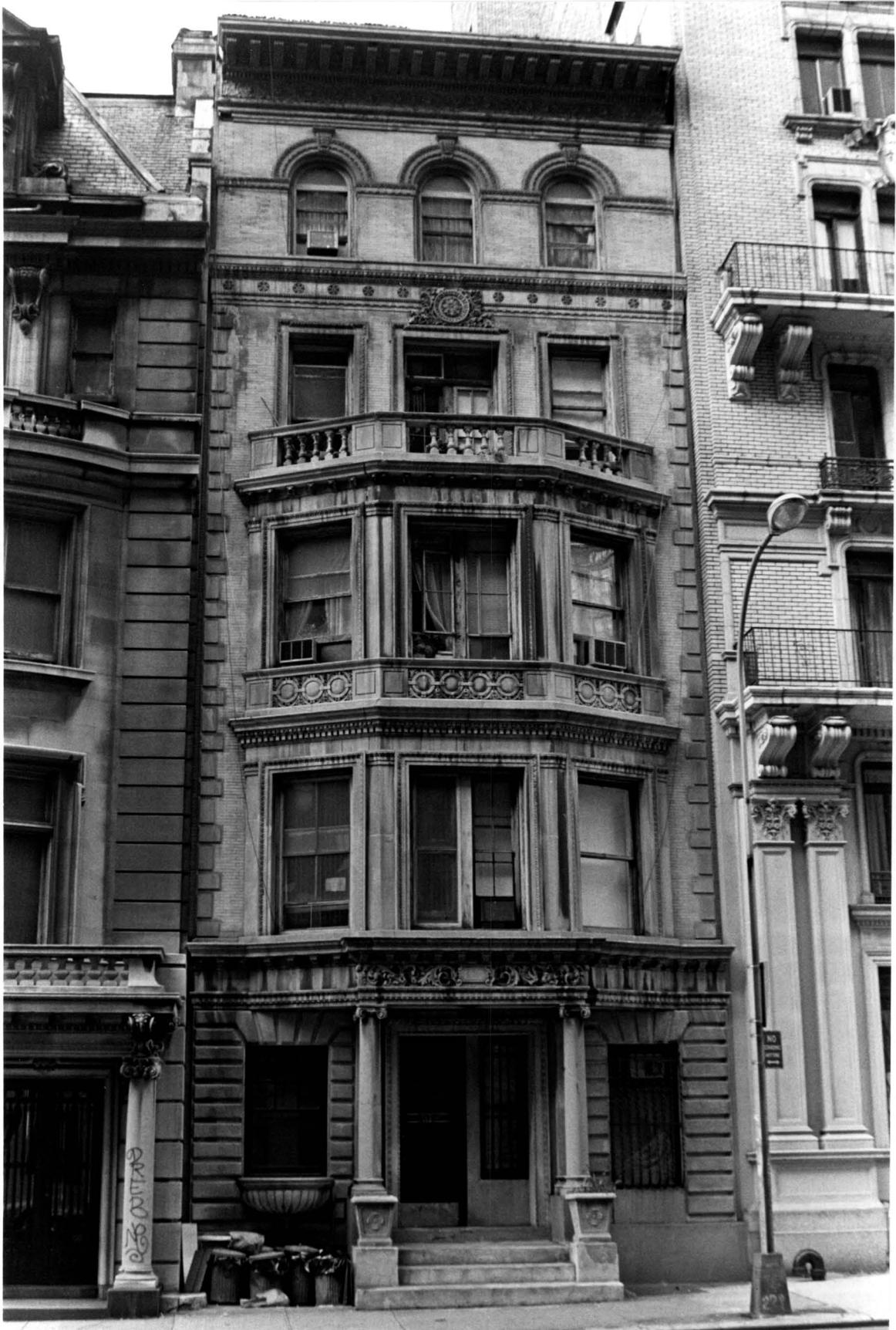


The Diller Residence, Landmark Site.  
 Graphic Source: Sanborn, Manhattan Land Book, 1988-89.

SEQUENCE OF LOT CONFIGURATIONS FOR  
BLOCK 1184, MANHATTAN.



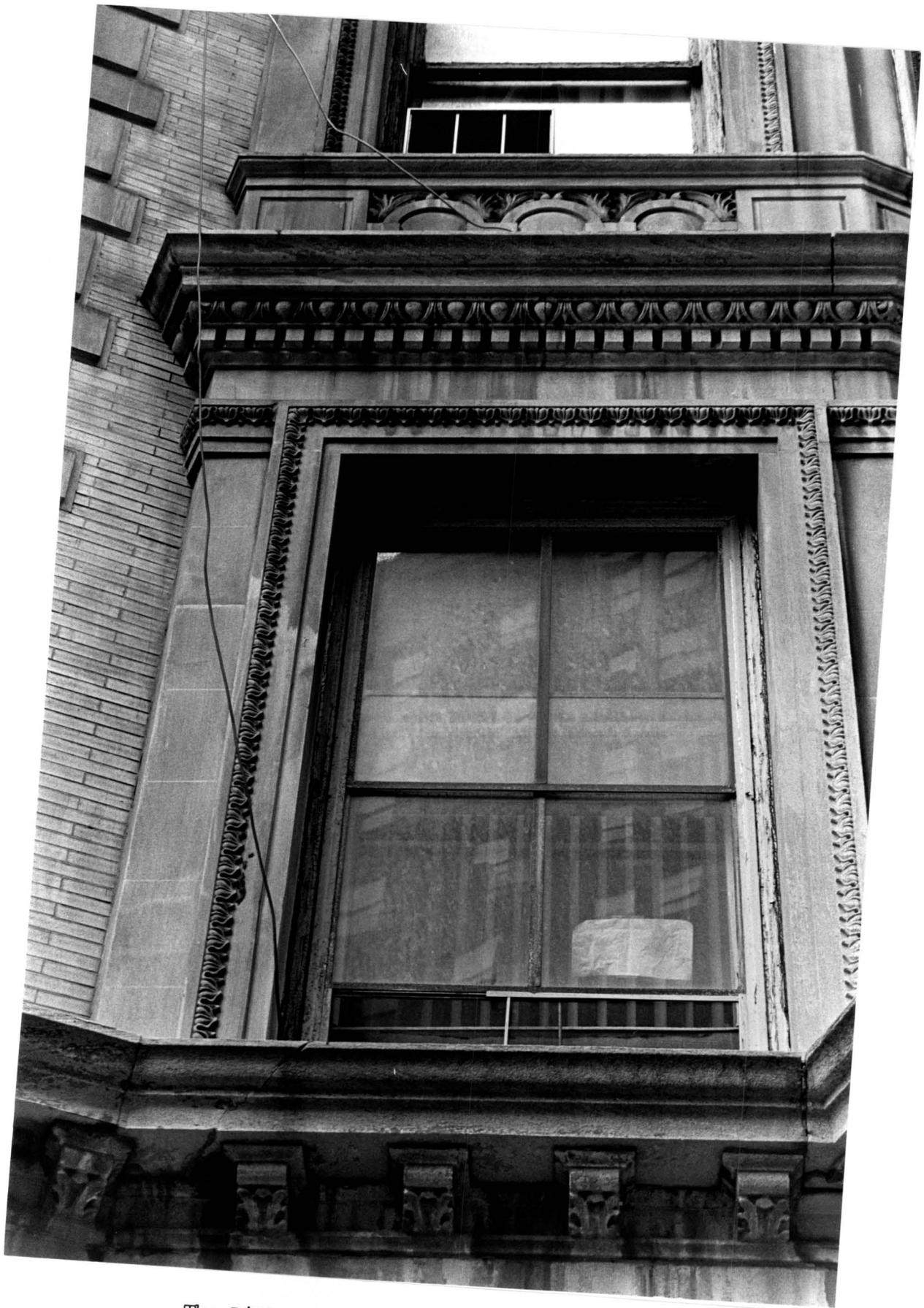
- 1) a. Original lot configuration with lot numbers (Bromley, 1879, plate 17).  
b. Original lot configuration showing 1867 (///) and 1868 (\\) purchases by John S. Sutphen, Sr.
- 2) a. Reconfigured lots with original lot numbers and existing structures c. 1909 (Bromley, 1898-1909, plate 6).  
b. Reconfigured lots with new lot numbers.
- 3) a. Current lot conditions with current lot numbers and structures (Sanborn, 1988-89, plate 99).  
b. Current lot conditions showing 1867 (///) and 1868 (\\) purchases by John S. Sutphen, Sr.



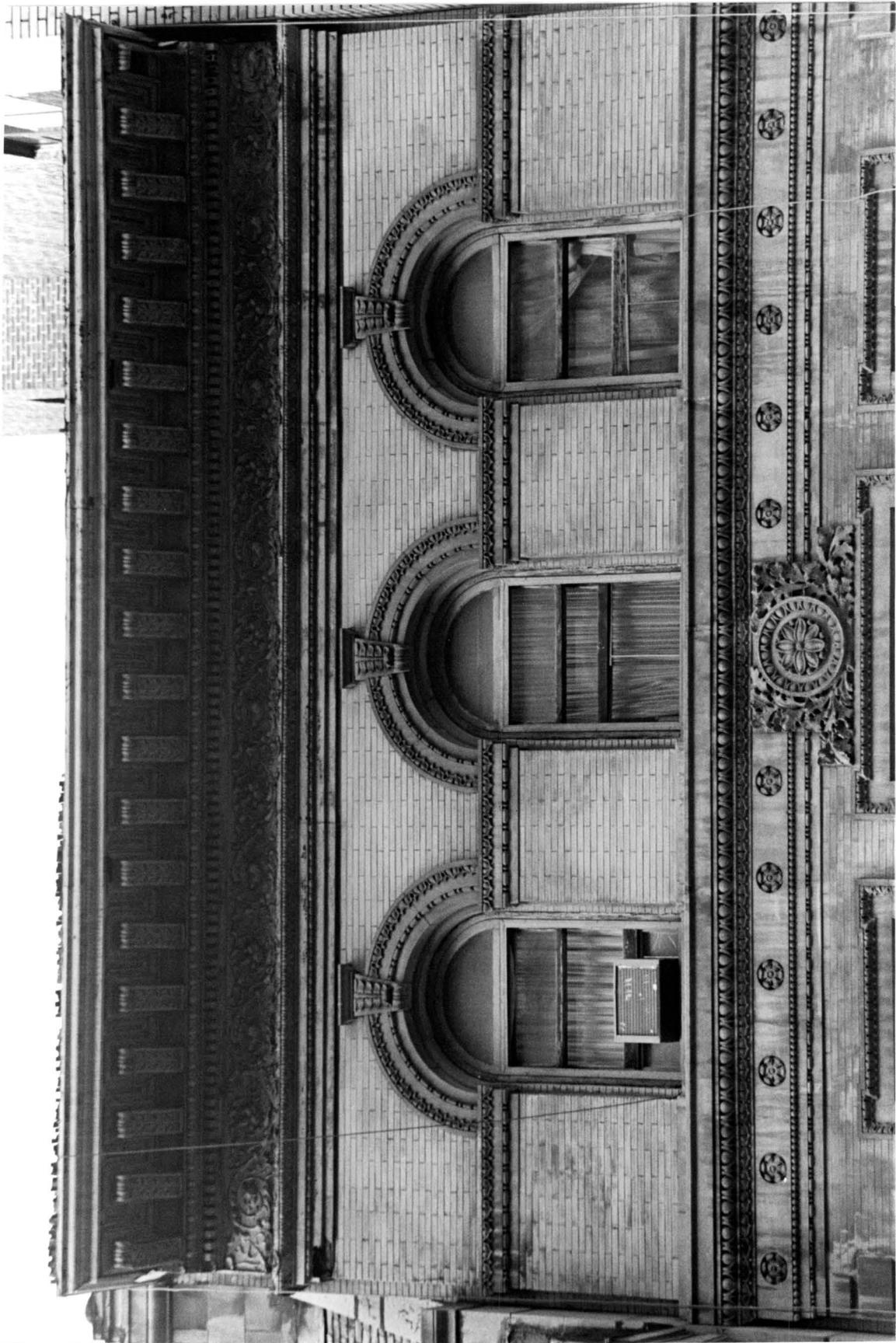
The Diller Residence, 309 West 72nd Street.  
Gilbert A. Schellenger, 1899-1901. Photo Credit: Carl Forster.



The Diller Residence, Detail of Entrance.  
Photo Credit: Carl Forster.



The Diller Residence, Detail of Window.  
Photo Credit: Carl Forster.



The Diller Residence, Detail of Roofline.  
Photo Credit: Carl Forster.